

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### COMMUNITY SAFETY IN A TIME OF INSURRECTION

**LAURA FLANDERS:** In August 2021, the US withdrew its troops from Afghanistan ending its longest foreign war. But when the last service member came home, they returned to a country where investment in the military had not wavered. With one of the largest military footprints of any US state, North Carolina has for decades attracted large private defense contractors like Blackwater, which was founded right here. But another kind of business is growing too, private tactical training facilities that cater not only to military personnel, police and veterans seeking to skill up or gain new skills, but also to civilians concerned about security and civil unrest. While much of the training involves role-playing, some in fake villages and mock homes, the weapons and explosives are real. As are the consequences for people nearby. I'm here in Richmond County, North Carolina, just a stone's throw from a facility called Oak Grove. It's one of these private military training facilities that are proliferating around this state. In this street, Roderick Brower and his mother and his uncles have lived for close to 50 years. When we came here yesterday to talk to them about it, the entire neighborhood showed up to tell us what it was like to live close to this place.

**RODERICK BROWER:** Okay, this is my parent's home. This is where I grew up, right here on Rushing Road.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** They wanted to talk, even though a huge thunderstorm was about to break.

**RODERICK BROWER:** To the park!

**NANCY BOSTICK:** Since they've come in, there's been a lot of noise.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Since who've?

**NANCY BOSTICK:** Oak Grove. That's when the bombing started.

**RODERICK BROWER:** It was one thing when they started shooting, we could deal with that. But when they started doing the breaching, blowing up stuff to open doors, it's like living in a battle zone.

**MS. CYNTHIA:** Yes, there's explosions, yes it's noisy.

**BARBARA BROWER:** You are laying in the bed at night asleep and all of a sudden it's boom.

**NANCY BOSTICK:** I have a lab who has anxiety issues. When they bomb, she goes crazy.

**BARBARA BROWER:** So it's a mess, it really is. I'd love to see it go.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How does it compare to the thunder we're hearing?

**BARBARA BROWER:** It's about that loud sometimes.

**LONNIE SWANN:** They shoot on Sunday, they shoot on Saturday, they shoot all week. September the 24th shot until 10:00 at night. Same August 31st, they shot till 10:45. People work, I work. When you gotta get up at 3 or 4:00 in the morning, sad.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The next day I went back to Rushing Road to hear more from Roderick and his mother Barbara.

**BARBARA BROWER:** At first, they told us it was gonna be a firing range and years, some years later, they kept getting heavier and heavier.

**RODERICK BROWER:** Building more and more stuff. You know, and with a firing range you would think, "Okay, it's gonna have opening hours," you know, have opening and closing hours. And now it's . . . They'll do breaching and stuff after dark. We've had reports, my uncle keeps files on it, they'll do stuff up until 10:00 at night.

**INSTRUCTOR:** Three to the body, two to the head, fire!

**RODERICK BROWER:** Once this started getting worse and worse, I just told mom to come and stay with me over in Pinehurst over in Moore County. But I feel sorry for those that can't move, like Cynthia. She's disabled and a senior citizen. My uncle, who's a senior citizen and he's came and him and his wife brought their house and put it on the old home place. You know, we have all this land out here, but I would never build on it now.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** If Oak Grove is creating this much turmoil for nearby residents, what do local elected officials have to say? And what, if anything, can they do? I met a Richmond County Commissioner and the mayors of the nearby town of Hoffman in a decommissioned elementary school. You were there when Oak Grove was first getting the permit, can you talk about that?

**DONALD BRYANT:** Yes, yes. We basically go by the zoning committee, the zoning okayed what they were gonna do. It's kind of a ritual. They came in, presentation, and it was passed. And

that was pretty well . . . Everybody kinda thought like a firing range is what we were kinda expecting. Probably did not look into it like we should have, that's my personal feeling.

**DANIEL KELLY:** When I first heard something, I didn't know the first thing about Oak Grove Techno. I heard there was gonna be a shooting range coming into the town of Hoffman. And the shooting range would be set up to train polices, the polices, FBI's or whatever, on the deal, and they had looked at this here, so I didn't check into it until a whole lotta explosion started going on. And I know that was more than gun. So I talked to the guy that was over that department with the county. And I said, by being on the town board, we shoulda been notified that something like this was coming into the town. And he said, "It's outside the city limits so we didn't have to notify the town on what was going on." I said, "I live right across from it and it's shaking my table and shaking my cabinet." And then I said, "That's not machine gun." I never shot a machine gun, but I know what's going on, that's not a machine gun. It's some type of explosions going on."

**TOMMY HART:** Yeah, it jars my cabinets in my house and I stay a little bit further than he does. And other peoples inside of the community that is concerned about that. So I just done the best, I mean, I talked to peoples about it. I talked when we went down to visit, I told them about it and they were saying, "No, it's not coming from here." And I said, "Well, the explosion is too close to say it's not coming from here." Then they said "It's not coming from here." And then they told me that they don't fire anything on Sundays and all of us that lives here know that they fire weapons on Sundays because we just heard it here recently.

**DONALD BRYANT:** This does affect people that live here and plan on living here. You're not gonna find a lot of people wanting to live in an area with a range like that. I don't think any business would wanna set up close to that area. So then you've hurt that section of the county, period. And it's really not good for the town of Hoffman.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Do you think racism was involved?

**TOMMY HART:** I don't know, I don't know.

**DANIEL KELLY:** Yes.

**TOMMY HART:** What did you say? I mean I don't wanna put . . . far as our concern is it very well could be.

**DANIEL KELLY:** Lord forgive me. Like I said, I been on the board all these long time, you know, and you go back, think about what race was 30 or 40 years ago. All you gotta do is think

about it. And I guess they did their homework and they'd know the most area they was gonna impact will be the black area.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Danielle Purifoy is Assistant Professor of Geography at UNC Chapel Hill and Board Chair of the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network.

**DANIELLE PURIFOY:** Two main commonalities are land control or political control. Land control, when white-led governments can steer developments that may ultimately help them financially, but locally will not be useful to them in terms of their harms or their externalities, they can shift that burden to communities that they don't want to have political power anyway. That increases the value of their land, as compared to the land in which they've shifted those burdens on. And that impacts not only what can be developed in those communities, because you're not going to see things that people associate with good kinds of development happening when there's a lot of toxicity and pollution and devaluation happening in an area. But it also impacts the way that those communities feel empowered politically. Don't get me wrong, they organize, they are the reason why we have any form of environmental justice law policy in this country, but being dumped on and being devalued has direct consequences for your land valuation, which has direct consequences for political status and power in this country. That's kind of how it works.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** But the local impact of private tactical training facilities on the community nearby isn't the only anxiety on people's minds. Richmond County Commissioner, Donald Bryant.

**DONALD BRYANT:** About a month ago, it started about two months ago, we asked for a tour. So I came with the zoning lady and Brian Land, which is County Manager, myself and Mayor Hart actually did a tour. And so we toured the complex, they carried us into one building about the size of this gym, I'm gonna say there was at least 500 pieces of machinery, weapons in that particular building, it was all Army military stuff. And I said, "Wow this is nice, this is heavy." I said, "Now if I come here and take training and I see this stuff available, why couldn't I get a group of idiots together and come take this over?" Now I've got a bunch of firepower that I could pick up very easy as far as I was concerned. I think if you had a group and you wanted to get training, then you could get training there. And we just don't need some people to be trained.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Like who?

**DONALD BRYANT:** My feeling.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Who are you worried about getting training?

**DONALD BRYANT:** Somebody that would go to Washington DC on January 6th. Okay? I'm serious, I mean this world is crazy. We don't need to train crazies. I'm sorry, that's it.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Are Commissioner Bryant's concerns well-founded? We know that roughly one in five of the defendants facing charges for their involvement in the January 6th attack on the Capitol were veterans or active duty military. Video analysis suggests that more than a few of the rioters that day were familiar with military tactics. We also know that several were from the group Oath Keepers, right here in North Carolina.

**BRIEN BLAKELY, REPORTER:** We're breaking down the events of January 6th that have disturbingly deep North Carolina ties.

**REPORTER:** The FBI just announcing another person has been arrested here in North Carolina in connection with the Capitol riots in Washington last month.

**REPORTER:** Another person from North Carolina has been arrested for their alleged role in the January 6th insurrection.

**REPORTER:** Gaston County man joins at least four others from North Carolina facing federal charges for the riot.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** At a time when national intelligence agencies are sounding the alarm about the increasing threat of domestic paramilitary groups, like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, the very idea that for-profit companies are training people in military techniques outside of government scrutiny raises concern. Commissioner Bryant isn't alone among those I interviewed who believe that places like this could end up training the wrong sort of people. Serena Sebring is the Executive Director of BluePrint North Carolina, a nonpartisan advocacy organization that convened local activists and their networks to trace the roots of the January 6th insurrection, and produced a report written by author and activist Mab Segrest titled, "Go There Ready for War: Militia organizing in North Carolina in the Context of the Insurrection at the US Capitol."

**SERENA SEBRING:** So January 6th happened, and we were still tracking these threats, these paramilitary groups, the militias, and we found that North Carolinians by the bus load went up to DC and then they came back to North Carolina and they carried the intensity of that moment into each county of this state. And many places, especially our most vulnerable areas, we found that there was a growth in these paramilitary training centers. And we know that the same kinds of threats that showed up at the polls and in DC at the insurrection are now in our hometowns, and specifically the hometowns of black communities and rural locations. And so this research is an attempt to really think about what does community-based safety look like at this scale.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** But here on Rushing Road, the question remains, is Oak Grove Technologies Tactical Training Center actually a place where civilians with paramilitary ties could train? On the third day we were there, a group called FieldCraft Survival was running a course for civilians at the center. On that day it was about edible plants, but the same group offers home defense courses to civilians.

**KEVIN P. OWENS:** Oak Grove, which is a phenomenal facility, normally they don't let civilians train here, it's for military and law enforcement only, but they believe in the mission. And they know that we are trying to prepare citizens to be ready for bad stuff happening 'cause there're bad people out there.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** That's Kevin P. Owens, Chief Operations Officer at FieldCraft Survival, a Utah based organization whose stated goal is to educate, train and equip clients to survive in the worst case scenario. It's unclear if that's the mission Oak Grove Technologies shares, but what is clear is that the founder and CEO of FieldCraft is also the creator of American Contingency, a group that militia watch under the Princeton University backed monitoring group, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project listed alongside the III%ers, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and others, as one of nine large multi-state groups that could present problems on election day. Here, Owens and Glover speak on the first episode of "American Contingency's" podcast recorded shortly before the 2020 election.

**MIKE GLOVER:** If this civil war kicks off, if it kicks off tonight, what does tomorrow look like?

**KEVIN P. OWENS:** Oh my God. I really hope it doesn't. I hate to even think about it, honestly. I really do. I hope we can get control of it, but every day that goes by, it seems less and less likely that we're gonna get this under control without violence. I really do. I think if Biden gets elected and they add four more seats to Supreme Court, and they're emboldened and they come with their far left politics and they throw out the Second Amendment and the First Amendment and do whatever they want, that will lead into a civil war. And it won't be black versus white, it'll be patriot versus freaking socialists, basically.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The Laura Flanders Show contacted Owens to learn more about who FieldCraft Survival trains and whether they have any sort of vetting process for their participants. Owens hung up on us. We also spoke with the general counsel for Oak Grove Technologies who initially claimed the center only trains professionals and promised a response. But when we sent a follow-up email asking how the weapons onsite are secured and if they screen their clients for ties to paramilitary groups, they responded with, "No comment." From here we're going to the county right next door, Hoke County, where the residents organizing with their commissioners

managed to stop the massive expansion of another private training facility, one going by the name of Reservoir International. Christina Davis McCoy is the secretary of the Hoke County branch of the NAACP and former colleague of Mab Segrest at North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence, an anti-militia group working in the 1980s.

**CHRISTINA DAVIS MCCOY:** I got this flyer in the mail and it provided information about a hearing that was coming up, and it encouraged the individuals, the recipients of this flyer, to call the planner and make him aware of the fact that you did not want this activity in your backyard.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Jim Davis is Hoke County's former sheriff, a veteran, and a retired US Marshal.

**JIM DAVIS:** The military have always been here in Hoke County. That's the military, that's the government, that's accountability, that's transparency. These paramilitary organizations are private, for-profit, septicious, secretive, unaccountable. We don't know them. We're concerned.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Harry Southerland is Chairman of the Hoke County Board of Commissioners.

**HARRY SOUTHERLAND:** The application talks about maybe training with firearm trainings and some non-violent exposure training, things like that. But we really don't know what type of trainings. I try to do my research before we have a hearing to learn about the company, to actually go around the site, to visit the site a little bit and see what I can see and learn. And also we had a staff that was actually focused on what was going on over at Reservoir. There was a quasi trial with me as a judge, and we had four other judges sitting with me. We had attorneys on both sides, the attorneys that was against us passing the zoning, they had two different law firms represented, I think maybe three law firms represented. And then of course Reservoir was represented by a law firm as well. We had good testimony, why we should or should not allow the conditional use permit, but the end result we voted unanimously not to approve Reservoir's request for the conditional use permit.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** You were right here in this room. Can you talk about what it was like?

**CHRISTINA DAVIS MCCOY:** We were elated. What was at stake on that day was again, the safety and security of our communities. The real message that needed to be sent that this was not a community that could be taken advantage of or was for sale for a few dollars.

**JIM DAVIS:** Well anytime you have the types of training that this company was gonna bring into Hoke County, which was undetermined, that type of training could be provided to the kinds of elements that stormed the Capitol on January 6th.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** What gives you the reason to believe that?

**JIM DAVIS:** My background and training is one, and the fact that they weren't able to give the county leaders their plans for the types of training and individuals that they would be training. That gave me pause.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** From our military, right through to private tactical training, this is all supposed to be about safety. But that's easy to forget with the sounds and shock waves of explosions. The threat of paramilitary organizing and attacks on elections.

**SERENA SEBRING:** Community safety is determined by the community that it comes from. We can't have safety that is determined by those who stand to profit in the case of these centers or systems that are so implicated and steeped in white supremacy, that they can't actually protect and serve the residents of these communities. So when we think about what does create community safety, we know that relationship can create safety. We know that communication, we know that actual representation of the people's will create safety. And we know that people who are in these communities are the experts at what is needed, and oftentimes have the strategies, the skills and the web of relationships to make a much greater impact than these systems that don't serve.

**CHRISTINA DAVIS MCCOY:** It was really necessary for our commissioners to be courageous and turn that back. I think it sent a message, not only for this community, but it also helped set up the dynamics for us to think about how do we share what these realities are for other communities. How do we make other communities aware of the fact that all of these processes are important. You got to be watching what's going on in your community. You have to be attending community meetings, zoning board, planning board meetings, as well as county commissioner's meetings. You need to get to know the people who are making decisions that you empower to make decisions on your behalf, because you want them to make the right decisions.

**HARRY SOUTHERLAND:** Courageous leadership is what's needed. So when they go to these other counties, they gonna try to find the weakest link and they gonna go there and they gonna try to infiltrate the weakest link. And these commissioners, these city councilmen, these mayors, gotta be able to stand up to what's coming. And find out what's going on. Don't just take people's word for it. Do some homework, do some research.

**SERENA SEBRING:** Hoke County is such a beautiful example of the power of community organizing and community-based approaches to safety. What we saw in Hoke County was a community that had been organizing for years to elect officials that match the demographics of their community. And what we also saw was that when they had access to community-based

research and could inform those elected officials of the threat that was coming, that they were able to prevent this harm. This is community-based safety through zoning, and it's kind of unsexy, but so very powerful for local community members to have access, to change the game and say "This won't happen here."

**RODERICK BROWER:** If I had any words of wisdom to anyone, get involved with your county, if you're outside the city limits, get involved with your county and really understand what they are voting on, because what happened with us is this just got bigger and bigger and bigger, and it's not what we signed on for.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** 60 years ago, President Eisenhower warned us about something he'd called the military industrial complex and the antidemocratic power that comes from the undue concentration of military might, money, and political influence. Today, rural North Carolinians are warning about something you could call a paramilitary industrial complex. Are we listening? It could be coming to your backyard. From North Carolina, for The Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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